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Tip to tap new overseers of CIA

Regardless of the outcome of the 1984 election, there will be nine new faces on one of the most strategic committees of the House of Representatives in January 1985. Who these new faces on the 14-member committee will be is so urgent a question confronting not only Congress but also the intelligence community that it is already being discussed in high government circles in Washington.

Under Public Law 96-450, passed Oct. 14, 1980, amending the National Security Act of 1947, both houses of Congress were granted the power of oversight of the intelligence community. It was a sweeping grant of power whereby the Central Intelligence Agency and "the heads of all departments, agencies, and other entities of the United States involved in intelligence activities" were ordered to keep the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Permanent Select Committee fully informed of any planned covert activities.

Following passage of the law, both committees adopted a rule that no member could serve more than six consecutive years on either intelligence committee. The rule presumably was adopted to prevent the intelligence community from becoming too influential with the committee members. Of course, what it also meant was that the experience about intelligence garnered by congressmen would be lost while the "new boys" would be learning the ropes. While the Senate will probably waive the six-year rule, the House will definitely enforce it.

The 1985 session will be the first time there will be a real reorganization of the House committee membership, and there is concern as to whom Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. will appoint from a list of applicants that is "as long as your arm." The concern revolves about the pressure from different caucuses in the House for representation on the intelligence committee. To put it bluntly, there may be members of some House caucuses who could not be entrusted with the knowledge of secret operations which is bared regularly before the committee by CIA spokesmen. This concern is already a matter of private discussion before other House committees and the Pentagon.

There is no question that accountability of the intelligence community to Congress has worked well, surprisingly well, over the last few years. As for leaks, one knowledgeable Washington source said the congressional intelligence committees were no worse than any other government bodies in Washington, "a city where everybody leaks and I mean everybody."

The point is that the oversight has been judiciously handled by both sides because the committees have taken their responsibilities with a seriousness that surprised everybody but particularly the intelligence community, which, after the Church and Pike committee investigations in the mid-1970s, had reason to fear any kind of congressional oversight.

One can get an idea of how well things have been going under CIA Director William J. Casey from informed sources who say that one of the most strategic elements of intelligence, namely, counterintelligence, which had been virtually dismantled in the mid-1970s, thus affording the Soviet KGB a free hand, was today being rebuilt. The days when the KGB could operate with a sense of immunity from CIA or FBI oversight are over and it can be said that counterintelligence, without which there can be no trustworthy intelligence, has come in from the cold.

All eyes are on Speaker O'Neill. If selection to the committee becomes a matter of satisfying different socio-political interests within the House, an oversight system which has turned out to be a relative blessing (compared to what might have happened had the anti-intelligence meat-cleaver establishment in Congress maintained their power) could lead to a new "unilateral disarmament" of U.S. intelligence in an era of expanding crisis.

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